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SAINT EUPHROSYNE OF POLACK IN THE HISTORICAL AND SYMBOLICAL CONTEXT OF FEMALE SANCTITY

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Abstract: The pre-Mongol Vita of St. Euphrosyne of Polack has to be examined in the context of comparative analysis of the gender aspect in hagiography. The report is focused on monastic and social activity of Euphrosyne of Polack as well as her religious foundations and pious donations. In the focus is Euphrosyne's pilgrimage to Jerusalem shortly before her death and its symbolical significance for the medieval hagiography.

Keywords: St. Euphrosyne of Polack, Hagiography, Pilgrimage, Jerusalem, Lavra of St. Sabbas.

ЕВФРОСИНИЯ ПОЛОЦКАЯ В ИСТОРИЧЕСКОМ И СИМВОЛИЧЕСКОМ КОНТЕКСТЕ ЖЕНЩИНЫ-СВЯТОЙ

Аннотация: Сведения из жития св. Евфросинии Полоцкой имеют большое значение в контексте сравнительного изучения гендерного аспекта в агиографии. В докладе внимание уделяется ктиторской, монашеской и социальной деятельности Евфросинии Полоцкой, а также в центре повествования ее паломничество в Иерусалим перед смертью и его символическое значение для средневековой агиографии.

Ключевые слова: св. Евфросиния Полоцкая, агиография, паломничество, Иерусалим, Лавра св. Саввы.

Critical hagiography deals with characteristic modes of behaviour and their interpretation in medieval Vitae. While studying the gender aspect of sanctity, some important features about female sanctity have been discovered. The Vitae of noble women often reflect historical and social realities, as well as represent an image that corresponds with the female characters of the New Testament and at the same time with historical saint women (Schulenburg, 2001). In this paper, the pre-Mongol Vita of St. Euphrosyne is examined in the context of female sanctity.

Euphrosyne was a princess, the granddaughter of the prince of Polack Usiaslaŭ, born in 1101 (1105). According to her Vita, at 12 years of age she decided to escape her parents' intentions to find her a husband and she left home choosing to take monastic vows in a convent instead. During her life as a nun she founded one monastery and one convent in Polack, became the abbess at her convent and strongly respected and venerated the cause of her pious life and religious and social activity. Due to her efforts, the famous icon of the Mother of God was brought to Polack, which, according to the tradition, had been painted by the Evangelist Luke. The pilgrimage to the Holy Land via Constantinople was undertaken by Euphrosyne when she was already old and she was aiming to "reach the Holy City of Jerusalem and to venerate the Holy Sepulchre and all saint places, to see and kiss them and there to end the life." She died in Jerusalem in 1173, and later her body was taken from the Holy Land back to Rus' – to the Kyiv Pechersk Lavra in 1187, and back to Polack only in 1910. The story of her pilgrimage might be partly legendary (Majeska, 1994: 3), but it seems to implement the medieval concepts of the perception of Jerusalem.

The episodes in the Vita of the 12th century saint Euphrosyne have many common elements with the image of holy women implemented by Empress Helena in the 4th century. She was the one who founded monasteries and churches, contributed to development of female monasticism in Old Russia, and she commissioned a large cross (edged with gold and silver, with little particles of relics from the True Cross, from the tomb of the Mother of God, etc.) for her religious foundation in the Spas Monastery in Polack in 1161 with an important inscription of the master who had made this cross (Dovgiallo, 1895). This action can be associated with the gendered role in the transition of Cross, initiated by the legend of Helena, which has many examples in both the Eastern and Western traditions (Garland, 1999: 45, 48). Also, Euphrosyne donated icons, took care of orphans and the poor, and undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land at an advanced age.

The story of Euphrosyne's travels started with the idea to end her life in Jerusalem, so her departure for Jerusalem was represented as a way to another world. All of the people were crying and asking her not to leave them

alone, which was similar to the procedure of farewell with dying persons. Having arrived to the gates, she fell on the earth saying "Lord Jesus Christ! Let it not to be a sin that I have dared to walk in thy footsteps and come into this Holy City!" This episode represents the notion of pilgrims to imitate Christ's way *(imitatio Christi).*

Euphrosyne visited the Holy Sepulchre three times and on the third day she appealed to God, saying "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, born by the Virgin Mary for our salvation! Thou said: 'Ask and you shall receive.' ... So I am asking from Thou, O merciful one, to finish the place of my request: take the spirit from me in Your Holy City Jerusalem and resettle me to Your highest (heavenly) city of Jerusalem and let me die in the bosom of the patriarch Abraham with all saints. Amen."

The idea of "dying in Jerusalem" has a deep symbolical or even mystical meaning to repeat the episodes of the Saviour's life, his way of the cross, the way to the passion and death on the one hand and the way to Resurrection into the eternal, heavenly life on the other. The last fragment of the Vita represents this concept very bitterly. Euphrosyne spent three days at the Holy Sepulchre (the three days that Christ had been lying dead in the tomb), which now brought her closer to the goal of Christian life – the salvation of the soul in the "heavenly Jerusalem."

After praying in the Holy Sepulchre, Euphrosyne very soon became sick and could just lie in the convent of Mother of God awaiting death. And soon her prayers about death in Jerusalem were heard by God who sent her an angel saying the words of the Archangel Gabriel to Mary: "Blessed art thou among women", and also, "and blessed be thy work! And the gates have been opened already, and all angels together gathered, holding candles, waiting to meet thou. And the gift that you're praying for by God, you will achieve." The fact of salvation preached by the angel here was motivated by the pious work Euphrosyne had been doing during her life (asceticism, monasticism, religious foundations, social work). And meeting death in Jerusalem (the closest way to the heavenly Jerusalem) is a particular gift for her devotional life.

The next episode is much more historical and real in its description. Now being sure about dying in Jerusalem, the blessed Euphrosyne began to look for a place to be buried. Very soon she sent her people to the Holy Lavra of Saint Sabbas saying: "The time is near when God makes me repose. Would you allow me to be buried in the Church of Saint Sabbas?" And the monks from the monastery answered so: "It is forbidden by St. Sabbas to admit any women. But there is the monastery of the Holy Mother of God of Theodosius the mutual one, where holy women repose: the mother of Saint Sabbas, the mother of Saint Theodosius, and the mother of Saints Cosmas and Damian named Pheodotia, and also many other saints; there you should lie." This episode seems to be

historically reliable. The Lavra of St. Sabbas had very strict rules against eunuchs, youths, and women. The Typikon of the monastery denied women access to the main monastery and to its principal dependency, even for prayer. Moreover, it was forbidden for the monks to visit convents for any purpose, or else carry on correspondence with a woman, or have any relationship with women (even spiritual ones, e.g., to hear their confessions) under threat of expulsion from the brotherhood (BMFD, 2000: 1314, 1316). The necessity of being buried in the sacral space of a monastery is characteristic for the Middle Ages. The location of the coffin inside the sacral space of a monastery had a special honourable significance, and the presence of the coffin promoted numerous prayers by the monks for the salvation of the soul of those buried there (Popović, 1992). Saint Euphrosyne died in the Russian monastery of the Mother of God and probably was buried in the monastery of St. Theodosius. Several years later her relics were taken back to Rus'.

The Vita of St. Euphrosyne of Polack contains information about her monastic life, pious foundations and pilgrimages, which on the one hand reflects the social and cultural realities of the epoch, and on the other hand represents an image of a female saint that complies with the evangelical and historical prototypes.

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